

The Violence of the Everyday

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Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Trans. with an Introduction Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Kolkata: Samya, 2003.

Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*. Trans. with an Introduction Arun Prabha Mukherjee. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.

The task of removing untouchability and establishing equality that we have undertaken, we must carry out ourselves. Others will not do it. Our life will gain its true meaning if we consider that we are born to carry out this task and set to work in earnest. Let us receive the merit that is awaiting us (Ambedkar 103).

As father carried stones upon his head

...

walking home he groped towards the song of bread
that he could never sing. (Bethe 56)

It has taken us a long time to come to an understanding of the aesthetics and politics of translation. Though critics and poets such as Robert Lowell speak of transcreation rather than translation, signifying the impossibility of actually trans-lating from one language to another, translation as a literary-political problematic has emerged as a powerful area of critical reflection and contestation only in the last few decades. The translator's job has generally been a thankless one: she has to be satisfied with the pleasure of sharing a favourite text with others of different languages, and of opening a window into a cultural space hitherto inaccessible except for speakers of the original language. Simultaneously, the twentieth century has come to recognize the power, the subtlety and constructivity of the act of translation through the reflections on language, culture and power by writers of 'negritude' and anti-colonial resistance, such as Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, or even Frantz Fanon. In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said adapted Michel Foucault and laid

bare for us the substructures of translation as 'discourse': literary texts could now be theorized as forms of 'power/knowledge,' of ideology. Thus, what is known as the problem of representation in culture and politics turns out to be a problem of translation of language and content, of ideas and their symbolic cultural constitution. This problem, which expands on Jacques Derrida's language-meaning theorization, has been demonstrated by Tjeswini Niranjana's work on translating India in the text *Siting Translation*.

We have to place Arun Prabha Mukherjee's translation from the Hindi of Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, against this background of politics of language, meaning and fundamental social relations, and within the arena of what Walter Benjamin has called 'the politicization of aesthetics' (241). Mukherjee states her reasons for undertaking this translation in the 'Introduction':

It brought to surface, as a scalpel penetrating deep into the flesh, the details of my childhood and adolescence in a small town in northern India, where casteism and untouchability were 'normal,' [Readers of the Columbia edition will not find the word 'normal.' It has been changed to 'accepted.'] where untouchables cleaned our latrines and carried away the excrement on their heads. (ix)

Motivated by the same politics of transformation towards social equality and justice that animated Valmiki himself, Mukherjee began to translate *Joothan*. As she puts it, she

... wanted to share this text with a wider readership in the hope that they, too, will feel its transformative power. Here in *Joothan* readers of English language texts will find another answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question: 'Can the subaltern speak?' Perhaps there is another question that needs to be asked. 'Can dominant society make space for the subaltern to speak?' I have translated *Joothan* as my contribution to making that space. (x)

Mukherjee's claim is well borne out. As I kept reading a whole world was opening out in front of me—a world searingly painful in its texture which upper caste/class Hindus or Indians generally keep at bay. The diasporic South Asian reader, the western reader, needs to know of and see this world that is so invisible and integral to South Asian Hindu society. They need to know it from Dalit writing itself, and not only from well-meaning pages of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, which nevertheless flounders in a condescending portrait of the untouchable victims' passivity. The active agency and direct voice of Valmiki and other Dalit writers, such as Daya Pawar and Arjun Dangle, or Kancha Illiah, who is a member of the Other Backward Caste

group (OBC), stand in stark contrast to Mistry's 'untouchables,' who need the patronage of their abusive Parsi employer.

Mukherjee's translation brings us in direct contact with this Dalit voice, with all the anger, pain and transformative urgency that situates Dalits as actors within society, culture and history. Moreover, Mukherjee's translation reveals Dalit lives as they have been lived, understood and politicized, and whose suppression and oppression have formed the very foundation of Indian society for a long time. This society extends well beyond that of Hindus to all the religious cultures of India. A pall of caste/class oppression has clouded the social and historically trajectory of the entire subcontinent for millennia. So direct is Mukherjee's empathy with the experiences and creative-political vision of Valmiki that she often made me forget that I was reading a translation. Behind the English on the page, through syntactical structures, turns of phrase, choices of synonyms, I heard the cadence of another language both on the linguistic, and socio-cultural levels. Given the difficulties of the task of translation this text is quite a feat. I should mention my own problem when translating into English from Bengali, another Indian language. The trouble with English is that not only is it a foreign, European language, but it is at present so removed from pre-capitalist, pre-industrial social cultures, so marked with a techno-rationality and commercialism, that it is an inadequate medium for translating symbolic cultural forms of other social/cultural modes. The realities, practices and images of South Asian cultures, the rhythms of South Asian lives, are frustratingly difficult to capture in English. In that sense I have reasons to believe that the languages of those European countries, which have incomplete or underdeveloped capitalism, and lingering memories of feudalism, such as Spanish or Portuguese, might be more helpful in their nuances. For all of these reasons, Mukherjee's success in being able to use the English language effectively is all the more noticeable.

It is in this context that we need to compare the Columbia University Press edition of *Joothan* with the Indian one. Noticing a discrepancy on the very first page between the two texts, I spoke to the translator and found out that the Columbia editor made unauthorized changes, which alter the meaning of the sentences. I am referring most specifically to a section where upper caste women are defecating publicly while sitting in a circle chattering away. About this Valmiki writes: "All the quarrels of the village would be discussed in the shape of a Round Table Conference at this same spot" (1). In the Columbia edition this reference has been completely mangled: "At this same spot they would have a conference at a round table to discuss all the quarrels of the village" (1). The Columbia version misses the irony and contempt with which

Valmiki views international round table conferences as sort of defecating sessions of the ruling classes or powers. This seemingly small change, however, removes the reader from the author's view of things, and also reveals an inadequacy of the Hindi of editors who do not comprehend the nuances of the text. On another note, Valmiki may also be parodying the Round Table Conference that Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar attended, since it is such a major part of dominant Indian history. All these permutations add to what I have called 'the politics of translation,' whereby a western editor with obviously less knowledge of Hindi, its vernacular and spoken practices if not even 'book Hindi,' can feel free to make changes without consulting the original translator. There is also an inconsistency that indicates both carelessness, and lack of concern in the Columbia edition. The title of the book on the dust jacket reads *Joothan: an Untouchable's Life*, while the title page carries the correctly translated title: *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*.

A further instance of the politics of translation is the way kinship relations are re-edited in the Columbia University edition. In spite of the fact that Hindi and other Indian languages have complex, detailed and specific terms for each type of kinship and the book's glossary could explain them, the editor has refused to use Hindi words which are deliberately used in the original. This refusal, again unauthorized by the translator, has made for a stilted text, one that further others the text and its Indian/Dalit subjects. The Columbia edition makes the text sound academic and halting and, of course, presents an implicated Mukherjee to the reader. Mukherjee appears complicit in this translation while, in fact she has been disempowered by a ham-handed and orientalist translation practice. To use expressions such as 'mother's brother' instead of 'mama,' or 'father's brother' instead of 'kaka/chacha,' when the text has a glossary is both politically and aesthetically unsound.

Equally problematic is the Columbia edition's practice of introducing visual chapter/paragraph breaks which the original text and translation did not have. It is not clear what these little textual blocks are supposed to facilitate, but it does give the impression that the western reader can not read this 'other(s)' text too much at a time. Valmiki is portrayed as being so alien and incomprehensible that the reader will require a pause or rest while reading the text. This action visually tampers with the text and also indicates that the editor is actively guiding the reader to an orientalist/otherized perception of India, thereby occluding the critical realist vision of Valmiki. One wonders if these seemingly superfluous changes were made for any reason other than to exert power over a Dalit and third world text, and if the press or this editor would have felt so free to make these unauthorized changes if the text was in any European language, written and translated by Europeans. As Valmiki re-

minds the reader, there is a high caste relationship of domination in *Joothan*. A close interpretation of these unauthorized changes similarly reminds the reader that the languages and literatures of South Asia stand subject to arbitrary power of our international high caste counterparts.

Mukherjee's 'Introduction' to *Joothan* is valuable for situating the text in its historical context and of the social organization in India. Furthermore, the Introduction sheds light on the issue of caste, a topic that is only beginning to garner the level of complex analysis that it demands. Instead of detouring through extensive footnotes and the resulting academicism, the 'Introduction' provides in a clear and concise fashion a brief overview of the emergence of the caste system and its "untouchable" outsiders. It also gives us a sense of Valmiki's own politics, and explains his references and allusions to various oppressive aspects of high caste Hindu social and political systems. We see the emergence of Dalit political trajectories with a detailed discussion on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the political development among 'untouchables' during the era of Gandhian nationalism and after Indian independence in 1947. It also relieves Dalit voices and politics from an illusion of homogeneity as both the author and the translator speak to a broad range of social analyses, formulations and political platforms and organizations. We see Dalit politics ranging from derivatives of Ambedkar's politics and the participation of Dalits in Indian mainstream politics, to the militancy of the Dalit panthers with its extra-parliamentary stance nuanced with issues of cultural identity and community or even separatism. This 'Introduction' could independently serve as an entry into teaching South Asian society and politics.

The two themes that pervade *Joothan* and have an echo for politics in both the West and the East are those of identity and community. They are expressed and explored as groundwork for politics of domination and resistance, as well as foundational aspects of Valmiki's own life story. Of course, on another note, the theme of identity is always the core in any autobiography as a way of mapping the trajectory of the self's development through social and historical experiences. These experiences which shape the self, providing it with content, and which always happen in relation to others, speak to the notion of community. But it is important to note that the way the notion of identity is posed here is not static or in any way essentialized. It is shown always in formation in a dialectical manner – an identity that emerges in a constant tension between stereotypical and negative ascriptions of a caste Hindu society and an evolved, achieved sense of subjectivity that constantly challenges and contradicts them. This process of self-making reflects experiences of power relations from below, the lowest reaches of society in which

every bit of self-assertion is also marked by constant questioning. For this reason, very frequently, sentences start with the questioning phrase, 'why is it that . . . ?' Valmiki is making himself by posing against what Sartre and others have called 'the look,' the dominant gaze, through his own looking back. These core issues of *Joothan*, their treatment through depictions, debates and discussions, have a profound relevance for readers in the West. In countries such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, which are white settler colonies with legacies of colonialism, genocide, slavery and immigration from formerly colonized countries, the same processes and struggles of identity and community formations are in progress. Indigenous, black and non-white writers and activists have written equally eloquently about the struggle between the self as an object of others and the subject of its own experiences and knowledges, making the question of 'being' divided at its base. For Valmiki and his counterparts elsewhere any 'becoming' is about fracture and making whole. From this point of view *Joothan* has what I would call a situated universality, and shows why and how the issue of identity is also able to produce a progressive politics rather than only one of regression, reaction and solipsism. This point deserves to be specially noted since the academic and activist world in Canada or the United States is divided into a schizophrenic formulation of 'identity vs. society.' Some have rendered the question of identity into a single issue of culturalism at the cost of broader social issues and politics, while others, especially Marxists, have offered a blanket rejection. They have denounced any concern with identity as rank particularism quite divorced from the politics of solidarity and social justice. As I have pointed out in a piece called "The Passion of Naming," both these stances are confused and shortsighted. 'Identity,' in the context of anti-colonial/imperialist or anti-slavery and class struggles, is a topic with revolutionary potential. It is only those whose selves, cultures and histories have not been robbed, violated, erased and criminalized who can take such a complacent stance on 'identity.' Most of the world can not take this stand.

Omprakash Valmiki's and other Dalit authors' preoccupation with identity and 'community,' in the sense of a group marginalized, oppressed through dominant social relation of power, cannot be dismissed as a limited and sectarian, solely culturalist approach. Marxism and humanism can not be handed out as an alibi for neglecting the social relations and cultural forms, which erase subjectivities and agencies of our world's majority. In *Joothan* we see how the humanity of these inferiorized others, both collectively and individually, is defined out of existence, 'the human' finding its face in a patriarchal, propertied, white and western prototype. It is for this reason that the passion for self-naming is as evident in Omprakash Valmiki as in the

self-liberated African-American slave woman, Sojourner Truth. This is why Valmiki will take a last name, which doubly signifies his Dalit origin as well as a claimed lineage to the mythic poet of the epic *Ramayana*. It is in fact this element of struggle to be and to become which connects an individual's and a community's identity to the struggle of Indian Dalits, tribals and lower castes for rights and social justice. This struggle is simultaneously cultural, political and economic because in our actual social existence these moments come into being in and through each other. We need only to read the collection of Dalit short stories in *Poisoned Bread*, edited by Arjun Dangle, to get a sense of what I mean. *Joothan* thus becomes a text of negation, and Dalits not just passive recipients of all injustices of Indian caste/class society but also creators of a politics and culture of resistance. This is an 'aesthetic of opposition' of which Mukherjee has spoken earlier. These texts of resistance are not only expressive of a determination to survive and persist against all odds, but to prevail. This makes *Joothan* and other Dalit autobiographies comparable to Afro-American slave narratives, such as that by Frederick Douglass. Echoes of a worldview to be found in W.E.B. Dubois' *The Soul of Black Folk* are also present in *Joothan's* social understanding. Also the present day relevance of Dalit politics for India as a whole grows stronger every year. They provide a substantial part of the political equation in such Indian states as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra.

In conclusion one must remark on autobiography as a chosen genre of oppressed peoples. In these texts the story of an individual becomes the life stories of entire peoples, speaking to pervasive social relations of power and hegemonic common sense and politics. Making of the self and remaking of society become transparently connected. Slaves, women, Dalits—people from the lowest social classes—produce narratives which are historic in remembering the past, figures other than the narrator, the present relations and connections, as well as desires pointing to the future. Thus these texts are at once individual and collective projects, where subjective recapitulations are testimonies to others' oppression and struggle. This is why in speaking of the self in autobiographies, short stories or poems, we are not allowed to lose sight of father-son, mother-children and sibling relations. Valmiki, in *Joothan*, pays a moving tribute to his parents, telling us how they stand in the foundation of his urge to go beyond the negative ascriptions of high caste stereotypes and brutal domination of Dalits.

In the current Indian political conjuncture of high caste/class domination steadily expanding into physical and socio-cultural genocide, as witnessed by Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, in which both the civil society and the Indian state are implicated, a text like *Joothan* is compulsory reading. It is a narra-

tion from below, from the margin of Indian society. In Valmiki's telling the great high caste Hindu epics, *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, stand shorn of their glory and are revealed as visions of legitimization of caste rule, now as before. *Joothan* throws an unsparing light on the Hindu right's use of these texts to Hinduize India as a nation and to put in place a process of constant marginalization or elimination of 'others.' This process is experienced by Valmiki as his own life, along with the burning issue of reconversion of Dalits from Islam, buddhism or Christianity. Using a pseudo-anticolonial rhetoric, high caste Hindu politics has declared Dalit and other subjects as 'inauthentic,' thus arrogating India to them. For South Asians living in the diaspora, in which access to Indian reality and history is hard to come by, *Joothan* provides a way to get access to the reality of India. It questions the aura of non-violence or pacifism that glorifies Hinduism and projects Muslims as the main perpetrators of fundamentalism and terrorism. We can understand why the Hindu right, which is now in state power at the center in India, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi as a 'Muslim lover' and why there are now political forces present in India who remember this with pride. Mukherjee has performed a valuable task by translating *Joothan*. Through her mediation readers both in India and the West will understand the politics of violence in the name of god that have been unleashed in India, but also understand other forms of religious and non-religious oppressions happening to minorities and marginalized peoples elsewhere, including in the West. Diasporic South Asians will better their grasp their own loss of identities and histories if they hear the Dalit voice of Omprakash Valmiki in *Joothan* and read Mukherjee's 'Introduction.' As for the fate of Indian politics and social change, we need to heed what Irfan Habib says in "Caste in Indian History":

But if the economic base of the caste system has been shaken, can the same be said of ideology? . . . So long as the conflict of interest between landless labor and landholding classes remains, there is an incentive for all castes to combine against the untouchables, whom we euphemistically call the scheduled castes. Caste still remains perhaps the single most divisive factor in our country. (179)

But the last word on politics should be given to Valmiki, who says:

When caste is the basis of respect and merit, important for social superiority, this battle can't be won in a day. We need an ongoing struggle and a consciousness of struggle, a consciousness that brings revolutionary change both in the outside world and in our hearts, a consciousness that leads the process of social change. (132)

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